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SUBJECT: Vietnamese Provinces Work to Get Religious Freedom Right

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¶1. (SBU) Summary: Although the Government of Vietnam's Committee on Religious Affairs (CRA) struggles to implement of the legal framework on religious freedom in some isolated provinces, a growing number of provincial and local authorities are having real success in promoting freedom of religion. On a recent visit to three of Vietnam's northern provinces, both Catholic and Protestant leaders highlighted a smooth registration process, freedom of assembly and worship for religious organizations, provincial support for church social and charitable activities, and a noticeable absence of land and property disputes. End summary.

¶2. (SBU) Poloff recently traveled to the provinces of Thanh Hoa, Ninh Binh and Nam Dinh south of Hanoi and met with provincial authorities, Catholic Church leaders and pastors of the Evangelical Church of Vietnam - North (ECVN). All highlighted a smooth registration process and freedom of assembly and worship for religious organizations, provincial support for church social and charitable activities.

#### Smooth Registration for Churches

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¶3. (SBU) The Catholic Church was not required to register in any of the three provinces, as it existed prior to the implementation of the legal framework on religion, and has technically been recognized by local authorities. The same was true of the small ECVN congregation in Nam Dinh while the ECVN church in Thanh Hoa province was required to register, as it was newly re-established in 2005. The pastor in charge of the ECVN church in Thanh Hoa province emphasized that his church received a great deal of assistance from the provincial authorities in preparing the registration application and establishing the church building and facilities. The church now has 120 members and six congregations and is growing.

¶4. (SBU) The Director of the Thanh Hoa CRA told Poloff they have a "positive relationship" with the ECVN and other religious denominations. Since May 2006, nine Protestant sub-congregations have applied for registration and been approved; six of those are affiliated with the ECVN and none are pending. The Da Nang Cao Dai missionary church has a small group of followers in Thanh Hoa province and CRA is working with the church's leadership in Da Nang to provide information and instructions on registering their congregation in Thanh Hoa. In an overall effort to be transparent and provide clear information on the registration process, the Thanh Hoa CRA enlarged all of the registration instructions and forms to poster size, and hung them outside of the CRA office in full public view, a move that CRA said was receiving positive public feedback.

#### Churches Face Shortage of Trained Clergy

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¶5. (SBU) Both the Bishop of Thanh Hoa and the Vicar General of Phat

Diem diocese in Ninh Binh province cited a shortage of trained priests, resulting from the closure of Catholic seminaries following the Communist takeover in Vietnam. The seminaries began to reopen in 1993, but can only accommodate a limited number of students. The Phat Diem diocese has only 50 priests to serve 145,000 followers in 73 parishes. However, the Vicar General said the situation is improving and his goal is to have at least one priest for every 1000 followers. The Bishop of Thanh Hoa echoed this problem - his diocese currently has 60 priests to minister to some 135,000 followers, but he hopes to increase that number to 100 by 2010.

¶6. (SBU) The Bishop of Bui Chu diocese in Nam Dinh province said that while his diocese currently has sufficient priests to minister to his flock of 387,000, he hopes to be part of the solution to the priest shortage in other provinces by opening a new seminary to train 50 priests per year. The new seminary project is pending final permission from the Holy See; the provincial authorities already granted all necessary permission without any problems.

¶7. (SBU) The ECVN also struggles with a lack of trained pastors to lead their faithful. The Nam Dinh ECVN pastor in charge reports that four ECVN churches in three provinces (Nam Dinh, Thai Binh, and Ha Nam) banded together to host short pastoral training courses. Both the ECVN churches in Thanh Hoa and Nam Dinh provinces also send pastoral students to training held by the main ECVN church in Hanoi without any hindrance from local officials.

#### Churches Permitted to do Charitable Work

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¶8. (SBU) Religious leaders said they are free to undertake social and charitable activities in each of the three provinces; most emphasized, however, that they do so within existing GVN rules and regulations. In Thanh Hoa, the CRA deputy director said religious groups are permitted to undertake social and charitable activities,

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but must follow the same regulations as all other social groups. He highlighted that both the Catholic and Buddhist churches are active in disaster relief efforts and the nuns at a local convent have opened a kindergarten. The Catholic Congregation of the Holy Cross Lovers in Thanh Hoa province runs a small medical clinic with basic care. The Buddhist church also provides services for the poor and children with disabilities and the Catholic Church has permission to run a youth vocational school. The Nam Dinh Catholic Church also runs a kindergarten, as well as an orphanage housing approximately 100 children, including many who are physically or mentally disabled.

¶9. (SBU) In Ninh Binh province one of the priests, Father Hai, highlighted a program run by Orbis (a U.S.-based NGO) in which the Catholic Church educates people on the benefits of cornea donation following death and facilitates the recovery of corneas from those who pass away. After a long effort to start the program, Father Hai stepped in to work with Orbis and the provincial Department of Foreign Affairs gave full credit to Father Hai as the man behind the success of the program. Father Hai noted that cooperation with the local hospital is excellent and they now have a system for donation.

Father Hai's success in introducing the program to priests, families, and doctors is evidenced by the fact that in an 8000 person parish, 40-50 people have now donated their corneas after death, in order to save the sight of others.

¶10. (SBU) ECVN provincial church leaders highlighted a lack of resources and manpower as the primary reasons that their churches are unable to do more social and charitable works. The pastor in charge in Nam Dinh shared that "provincial officials are encouraging me to conduct more charitable activities, but I only have 40-50 congregants and as they are largely poor themselves, they have a hard time contributing much." He noted an ongoing relationship with a Korean Protestant church, which funded the construction of a hospital in the province. The Korean Protestant congregation regularly funds two doctors to travel to Nam Dinh to provide medical check-ups for the ECVN congregants and other poor people.

Inter-faith Soccer - Monks v. Priests

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¶11. (SBU) The Christian church leaders said that while they do not have much interaction with other religious faiths, their followers generally live in harmony with those of other faiths. There are no reports of religious-based conflicts between faiths in the three provinces. In Ninh Binh the Provincial CRA facilitated a visit by Vietnamese H'mong from France to Catholic churches in the province in 2007 and, earlier this year, they conducted a joint tourism trip to Hanoi for Catholic priests and Buddhist monks that was very well received. The provincial CRA officials also noted that Catholic priests and Buddhist monks compete against each other at a community sports festival every year, culminating in a particularly high-spirited soccer match.

#### Looking to the Future

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¶12. (SBU) Many of the church leaders reported that their congregations are out growing their facilities. In Thanh Hoa, for example, the diocese plans to build new facilities to accommodate a seminary and housing for additional priests, while the ECVN pastor is currently preparing a proposal for two new buildings that will house Bible classes and a residence for the pastor in charge.

¶13. (SBU) At the same time, leaders of both faiths hope to expand their social and charitable activities. The Bishop of Bui Chu diocese in Nam Dinh province is working to open a house to care for up to 20 pregnant women in need. When asked about permission from the provincial authorities, he responded that the Church's relationship with the province was such that there was no need to ask permission. The Thanh Hoa diocese plans to establish an educational scholarship fund to benefit poor students, Catholic or not, to contribute to the overall community.

¶14. (SBU) In Nam Dinh province, the ECVN pastor in charge hopes to set up a center for orphans and children with disabilities, but noted that the church would need international funding and assistance to get such a center off the ground. He also mentioned that he is a member of the Religious Initiative by the Vietnam Fatherland Front (the Communist Party's umbrella organization) to increase participation by faith-based organizations in addressing HIV-AIDS and recently attended a UNICEF-sponsored conference in Bangkok on children with HIV/AIDS.

¶15. (SBU) The Vicar General of Phat Diem diocese noted that in fulfilling their duties as Catholics, the church is also discussing how to conduct missionary activities in accordance with the legal framework on religion. He said the Bishop's office has a productive

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relationship with the provincial CRA and is also having good discussions with the People's Committee on the way forward, noting that the two sides "meet regularly and talk in a frank and candid manner." While the two sides sometimes have differing views, the Vicar General stated that the Church understands it must respect the national level ordinances and regulations, remarking that, "We need more talks and still have a long way to go, but we will get there."

#### Comment: Provinces On the Right Track on Religion

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¶16. (SBU) The overriding impression left by religious leaders in all three provinces was very positive. All cited improved conditions, freedom of administration of church affairs, and good working relationships with provincial CRA and other local officials. The ECVN pastors in both Nam Dinh and Thanh Hoa provinces confirmed that provincial and local authorities have been supportive of the development of their congregations and of church activities. The same was true for the Bishop of Nam Dinh, who noted that in his seven year tenure, the Catholic church has had no problems with any local authorities on any issue and enjoys a positive and productive relationship with government officials. The Bishop of Thanh Hoa echoed these sentiments.

¶17. (SBU) A number of factors may account for the steady progress on religious freedom in these three provinces. Both the Catholic and Protestant churches have had a long term presence that likely contributes to a greater understanding of Christianity and the view that religious organizations can contribute to society. Further, the sheer numbers of Catholic followers, close to 700,000, means that the Christian faith and the Catholic Church are more integrated into the community at large in these three provinces than they are in many other areas. Indeed, one cannot drive more than a mile or two in Nam Dinh province without having a Catholic church come into view. As a result, Christian religious organizations in these provinces are not regarded as "outside" or "Western" and are not viewed as a threat to social stability or to the GVN's authority.

¶18. (SBU) Provincial officials, both from the People's Committee and the Committee on Religious Affairs, expressed pride in their promotion of the legal framework on religion and noted that they continue to work with the various religious groups in their provinces to ensure cooperative relations. While the potential for isolated problems still exists, the progress made on religious freedom in these provinces and the positive attitude and actions of the provincial officials set a good example that other provinces in Vietnam can follow over time.

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